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France Breaks Silence on Ben Barka

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PARIS, May 6—The French Government broke its six-month silence today on the circumstances surrounding the abduction and probable murder of Mehdi Ben Barka, a Moroccan nationalist and opposition leader.

Interior Minister Roger Frey, in a long speech before the National Assembly, defended himself and the Government against all charges of wrongdoing.

According to his account, the culprit in the affair was the official French counterintelligence agency, two of whose officials were informed of the crime but failed to report it to the Government.

Mr. Frey's appearance before Parliament was not voluntary. Several opposition deputies had served notice that they wanted to question him about the "Ben Barka scandal." This procedure is the French equivalent of calling on a Cabinet member to testify before a Congressional committee.

The step-by-step account of the crime and subsequent investigation given by Mr. Frey was the government's first comprehensive statement on the case.

Mr. Ben Barka was kidnapped about noon on Oct. 29 from a busy sidewalk in Saint-Germain des-Pres by two policemen, a counterintelligence and some gangsters.

He was driven to the suburban villa of one of the gangsters where, according to statements by one of them, he was tortured and possibly killed by the Moroccan Interior Minister, Gen. Mohammed Oufkir. General Oufkir has denied any role in the matter.

Mr. Ben Barka's body has not been found. Last week, acting on an anonymous tip, the police dragged a large swamp near the villa.

Six persons are under arrest in the case, including the policemen and the agent as well as the latter's immediate superior in the intelligence service.

The policemen have testified that they acted on instructions of the agent, Antoine Lopez, and that they thought the purpose of the abduction was to bring about a meeting between Mr. Ben Barka and Moroccan officials.

Mr. Lopez, who was also an official of Air France at the Paris airport, has testified that he reported the planning for the abduction and the operation itself to his superior, Maj. Marcel Leroy-Finville.

Mr. Frey repeated the statement that the intelligence agency had failed to alert the Government or the police.

He glowingly defended Pierre Lemarchand, a lawyer and Gaullist Deputy, who was disbarred by the Bar Association for his role in the case. Mr. Lemarchand is a close friend of the Interior Minister, so that his role is one of the most explosive political issues in the scandal.

It has been established that he was informed of the crime almost immediately afterward by a friend and former client, Georges Figon, one of the kidnapers. Mr. Lemarchand gave some of this information to the police, but in subsequent questioning by an investigating magistrate he got entangled in multiple contradictions and left the impression that he was far more deeply involved than he had acknowledged.

Gaullist deputies in the As-

sembly made a strenuous but futile effort last week to have Mr. Lemarchand rehabilitated. During debate on an amnesty measure, they sought an amendment lifting the Bar Association's sanction against him. The amendment was defeated, with a number of Gaullists and all the Independent Republicans, a group allied with the gaullists, voting against it.

The vote marked the first time that the Government majority in the Assembly had been so divided.